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W. E. H.

Dropsy

An Essay on Inflammatory Anasarca & Ascites
by
J. R. Saufley
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immediate cause, a debilitated condition of the system — Hence Dr Good, in his chapter on dropsy observes that "a want of action on the part of the absorbents is, in every instance, the result of debility" — "Profuse exhalation on the part of the secernents or terminable arteries, in most cases, proceeds from a like cause — for (says he) it takes place from a relaxed state of the vessels, which open their mouths widely & suffer the serum & watery fluids to escape with too much freedom" — again he says that "we shall generally find all those affected with dropsy, to have been labouring under debility for some time antecedently; that they are weakened by protracted fevers, or languishing under the effects of an unkindly lying in &c" — But that dropsy is not always connected with this relaxed & debilitated state of the system, we have the authority and testimony of recent and respectable writers; and moreover the many

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signs, circumstances, and symptoms connected with the disease, would lead us to an opposite conclusion— Dr Blackall a late writer directs us to the consideration of the urine, as affording a just criterion, whereby the different conditions of the system, with which dropsy is connected, might be ascertained with precision— He tells us that when the urine was coagulable like the serum of the blood, by heat or Nit. Acid, he uniformly found the system to be labouring under an inflammatory and febrile action; and when dropsy arose from, or was connected with feblenes of action, or exhaustion of constitution, the urine was scanty, pale and not coagulable by the tests aforesaid— Keeping those signs in view and probably directed by other symptoms, he treated those cases accordingly— and from his statement, with the happiest results— if then reliance can be reposed in such au=

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thority, we have unequivocal evidence that Anasarca or Ascites can have originated in a state of the system entirely different from that of mere relaxation or debility — besides to substantiate this point we need go no farther than the daily observation of every practitioner, who may have observed repeatedly the dry cough, pain, the hard bounding or chorded pulse, the buffiness of the blood when drawn and many other indubitable signs of a febrile and inflammatory action in the system — again it would hardly be said that the watery accumulations in dropsy are the result of a mere transudation; for if that were the case (which would imply that the vessels are unable to resist the force of the circulation) the fluids thus escaping would be of the same nature with the blood or blood itself; but as this is separate from the blood it must be done by a secretary

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action this being the case, it must necessarily follow that the quantity secreted will be in proportion to the action of the exhalents & the quantity of the fluids acted upon—

In denying dropsy to have its origin exclusively in debility, it is not my intention to run into the opposite extreme and ascribe its proximate cause in every instance to increased action—an assertion which would be entirely gratuitous, as we see cases frequently to occur wherein all the signs of debility are so manifest as to exclude all possibility of doubt—and again we are told that there is an order of dropsy which arises from fullness of the venous system & from a feeble action of the heart & arteries which would alone do away with the universality of this doctrine—

In speaking of the rapid accumulation of water in some dropsical cases—a respectable author observes that it might be accounted for by a

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partial or total suspension of the absorbents without taking into account increased exhalation — that a partial suspension of the action of the absorbents may take place I will not deny — but instead of ascribing it to a debility of these vessels - I should rather say that it was, for the most part, the result of the peculiar condition of the bloodvessels in the parts, and not from a debility of the absorbents — If we admit of a torpor of the Lymphatics, it must be limited to those situated immediately on the surfaces or cavities into which the water is accumulated; for in contradiction to this inactivity pervading the whole absorbing apparatus, we see persons affected with the disease otherwise emaciated - evincing an active employment of those vessels in other parts of the system, Concerning the proximate cause of Dropsy there still exists a diversity of opinion among practi=

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tioners — some imputing it to increased secretion from inflammation whilst others observing the apparent weakness of the system in this disease have concluded that it is the immediate result of a loss of strength, & tone in the parts connected, a lapity of the exhalent vessels, and an inactivity of the absorbent system — "the serum of the affected cavities (says Dr Blackall) is not favourable to the uniform truth of" the latter supposition "for it has been found opaque in various degrees, discoloured, and containing pieces of lymph" — "This very variety (says the above Author) proves a morbid state; and shows that it frequently tends towards the inflammatory" — "In addition to those appearances of the dropsical fluid" (continues the above Author) which argues a secretion often different from that of mere relaxation, the membranes are likewise sometimes greatly inflamed and disfigured" — as instances of these facts

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he related many cases - besides many of the remedies are antiphlogistic; and there is a certain stage, it is said, in almost every case of the disease, in which tonics do material injury. The testimony of the author above quoted, with others that might be mentioned, is sufficient to convince us of a morbidly increased action in the exhalent - But let us not, in endeavoring to prove a morbid & increased secretion, overlook the absorbents situated in the diseased parts - for there is no well grounded reason, even under such a condition of things, for denying that a constant though diminished absorption is going on - This inactivity, as before stated, has been, by some, considered the result of debility - others have attempted to account for it by supposing that the secretions presented to this set of vessels differed from its natural state and was not suited to their elective power - how

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far the latter may be correct I could not pretend to say — I think, however as before suggested that this tardy removal of the effusion, during the inflammatory stage, might be attributed to the plethoric & engorged state of the bloodvessels in the affected parts — Dr. Chapman observes (Therapeutics) that "the bloodvessels and Lymphatics are, to a certain extent, antagonizing powers, and while the former retain their force, the functions of the latter are feebly exerted — and it has been proven by actual experiments, by a writer of high authority, that when there exists a preternatural plethora of the bloodvessels absorption will be more or less suspended — These explanations seem equally applicable, whether we consider the veins as supposed by some, to be endowed with the power of absorption, or whether with others we ascribe this important function to a distinct set of vessels, or to both — if we =

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concur in the former the condition of the capillaries & extreme vessels admits of a ready solution — if the latter, besides the usual methods of explaining diminished absorption, we might suppose, that the mechanical pressure from the distended & engorged vessels, and of the diffused swelling, would of course affect the Lymphatics in the parts diseased, to a considerable degree — thus impeding their functions — Having taken a cursory view of the immediate cause of that form of the disease, which is the subject of these few remarks, and which is not new, but long since suspected, to constitute one form of dropsy, by Medical Men whose names stand conspicuous in the profession, it becomes necessary in the next place to enquire into some of the remote causes which induce this particular condition of the system

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enumerated as the remote causes of the disease, are such as the indiscriminate use & abuse of Mercury, Intemperance in the use of spirituous liquors, Intermittents of long standing or injudiciously managed, Exposure to a Moist & cold, or changeable atmosphere, Scarlatina, drinking too freely of cold liquids when heated & much excited &c —

The Mercurial habit, the result of the abuse of the mineral, is, by some Authors, conceived to consist of a loss of tone, and debility in the system — by others it has been thought inflammatory, the former assuming as an argument in support of their position, that by an acknowledged law of the animal economy, all unnatural & powerful stimuli are succeeded by a corresponding state of debility & relaxation — and Mercury, being a substance which exerts that exciting influence will consequently leave that relaxed condition, which when dropsy

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is the result, favours the pouring out of the watery fluids — It is observed that if diarrhoea supervenes the repeated & indiscriminate or indiscreet exhibition of this Medicine, it is probable that the Mercurial habit, that ultimately ensues, will be blended with much debility; but if the Mercury has been passed by the skin, and no great discharges have taken place, or if the secretions have been checked by cold, a disorder will follow more distinguished by irritation & inflammation than weakness or debility —

As a still farther evidence & additional argument in favour of a phlogistic diathesis being the result of this condition of the body, it is remarked, that the blood when drawn is usually found to exhibit a remarkable buffy appearance, and that venæsection is the best remedy found even in ptyalism — It is again observed by another Author that "it is too apt

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to leave behind it an inflammatory diathesis, so much so indeed, that I would recommend to you as a general rule in all severe attacks of diseases, where mercury has preceded, to bleed early and freely." Intemperance in the use of ardent spirits is said to be a very frequent cause of dropsy, by producing a deranged state of the digestive organs which impairs the nourishment of the body, vitiates the blood, and gives vigour to the action of other causes; and this excess of drinking has been thought by some capable in itself of bringing on the anasarcous swelling. Intermittents, from being ill managed, not unfrequently become the remote cause of the disease, either by contributing, in conjunction with the remedies injudiciously employed, to visceral congestions; or by producing such an irritation of the system, which, by the accession of any other cause, would rea=

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dily take on an inflammatory diathesis, terminating in serous effusions — Cold whether externally applied; or internally by means of cold drinks when the system is greatly heated, & excited, is equally capable of producing inflammation, which frequently terminates in dropsy, which some authors consider as a salutary process of nature — It is observed by a late Author that "there is even some reason to think, that the swellings after scarlatina are partly referrible to cold acting on a tender and denuded skin; & even changes from a cold to a hot temperature if too suddenly, may be the exciting causes of the Scarlatinous Anasarca; and in order to avoid these changes, it is proper to submit to the most rigid confinement, in the winter, for about six weeks." — I might perhaps extend the number of remote or exciting causes, amounting even to prolixity, but enough, it is

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hoped, is said to show, that these in a plurality of cases may give origin to those acute or chronic inflammations of the serous membranes, which so frequently lead to Ascites or Anasarca, and if the above be admitted, we might safely infer that other causes may, by similar action either produce this over excitement, or secondarily occasion a great morbid irritability of the system, rendering it very susceptible of inflammation by the agency of other causes—

Considering Dropsy thus to have its origin with an inflammatory diathesis—the first indication, in endeavouring to effect a cure, is to remove the remote cause, which excites this disposition. secondly to counteract the existing inflammation, which is the immediate source of the effusion, & to evacuate the accumulation: and thirdly to change that state of the system, favourable to further effu

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To meet the first indication, the causes which give rise to the disease, should be carefully investigated, for frequently it has happened, that by removing the irritating or exciting cause, the system by virtue of its own sanative power has effected a cure—but the inflammation, in many cases, being already established, it will be necessary so to direct our medicine as to counteract both at the same time; & it sometimes happens that the cause is of that nature which demands a strict antiphlogistic treatment—Consequently the remedies in fulfilling this will be equally adapted to the second indication— If the effusion for instance has been the result of an inordinate use of spirituous liquors, or exposure to a cold, variable, or moist atmosphere, these should be cautiously avoided—if it is the consequence of a long

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continued or badly managed intermittent, or deranged state of the abdominal viscera, & chilopoetic apparatus—the attention of the practitioner should be early directed to the removal of them; and to obviate their further encroachment; for without doing this the removal of the effusion would be of but little profit— The treatment of the various diseases, on which Anasarca & ascites may depend, has been pointed out & treated of by the different systematic writers, at full length, therefore I shall avoid entering into any detail on that point— To answer the second indication, of counteracting the existing inflammation, which, though the remote cause be removed, may continue, and to evacuate the accumulation, the antiphlogistic treatment is strictly to be observed—and among these agents V. S. may be considered as one of the most powerful— as a remedy in counteracting inflammation in other diseases it

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now admits of no dispute— In the commencement, & throughout the disease for the most part, when there is much fever, the pulse tense, frequent and very active, bloodletting, though formerly objected to in this disease, is now considered indispensibly necessary— The buffiness which the blood exhibits when drawn with the relief it affords is a strong confirmation, it is said, of the propriety of the operation— Depletion by the lancet, besides the power of reducing inflammation and bringing down febrile action, has the advantage of promoting absorption, by lessening the quantity of fluids in the circulatory system— the power of the bloodvessel and lymphatics being in an inverse ratio— and cases are on record where the removal of the disease was accomplished by venae-section alone— With regard to the time of operating & the quantity to be drawn the practitioner must be governed by the peculiar-

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ity of the case, & by his own judgment — Some recommend frequent & copious bleeding whilst there are unequivocal signs of inflammation and febrile action, and the constitution of the patient is vigorous; whilst others think that notwithstanding the apparent debility, this remedy should be resorted to: and Dr Blackall has recorded cases of this kind evidently showing that venaesection is, in most cases, chiefly to be relied on — and a case of Dropsy communicated by Dr. Culbertson of Chambersburg, shows satisfactorily to what extent bloodletting in such cases might be carried, & the necessity of continuing it to derive from it its full effect. Though many cases are on record where it is said, that bloodletting has, without the aid of other means, accomplished cures; still we are not to repose entire confidence in it, to the exclusion of other remedies — but on the contrary other

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means against inflammation—and those capable of evacuating the accumulated fluids are to be resorted to— The remedies for fulfilling these indications are purgatives and diuretics. Cathartics, as a powerful means of reducing dropsical swellings, appear to have been long known to the antients— and it being supposed by them that the disease had for its immediate cause either partial or general debility, the great desideratum was to evacuate the water with such medicines as would not increase the weakness of the system any further— but according to the experience of later practitioners the medicines then used were ill calculated to answer that end as they consisted of the most drastic kind— such as gamboge, helebore, elaterium &c These are undoubtedly capable of exciting very copious excretions of watery fluids, but the heat and fever, which they are apt to create, and the

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increased debility of the digestive organs which they leave behind, from the necessity of their almost daily exhibition, render them very objectionable — to use the phrase of a certain writer they tear to pieces whilst they unload — Cullen observes that "the more drastic purgatives are the most effectual for exciting absorption, as their stimulus is most readily communicated to the other parts of the system" — but these medicines would appear to effect this end viz. absorption by a different way, for, it being a law of the circulation, that if depletion be made from any set of vessels the current of the circulation will be directed to those, and of course, the blood diminished in other parts, it would appear as a consequence that the increased action of the absorbents would be the result of a contrary effect — Among the later practitioners, the saline purgatives & the other mild cathartics have completely superseded the use of those recommended

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by the older writers, which are said to be mischievous where the disease is associated with fever & much inflammatory action — As a means, therefore, in inflammatory dropsy, of relieving the blood vessels of their plethora, in the parts diseased, and consequently removing the mechanical pressure from the absorbent vessels thereby promoting absorption, and as a means of lessening arterial action, & subducing inflammation, besides the advantages afforded by keeping the alimentary canal clear of all irritating matter & preventing constipation, Cathartics are of the greatest importance —

The purgatives recommended as most suitable to this form of the disease are the different Saline preparations — of these the Potass. Super Tartras has sustained the greatest reputation; this may be given either alone, or perhaps better in combination with jalap, or some other active cathartics — these preparations besides their —

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evacuating quality, may be given in such a form as to enter the circulation and unlock, of themselves, the natural secretions, which are in dropsy, evidently deficient — To give a detail of all the cathartics which have, at different times, been recommended in this disease, & the manner of their operation, would be entirely too tedious — the object in view is to subdue inflammation & promote absorption, and such as may be found most suitable, whether alone or in combination with each other, should be administered — Antimonials both as emetics & as nauseants have been highly extalled — that they are capable of overcoming a phlogistic diathesis is a point tolerably well established; but the latter mode of action would appear preferable in that form of the disease under consideration — The rule laid down by those who have had extensive experience in this disease, is that purgatives should be repeated

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as often as the strength of the patient will permit, or at least three or four times a week until the water is removed — "Frequently there may be such an accumulation of water as to render the evacuation of it by the natural outlet very slow; and sometimes even difficult: under such circumstances the water (says Maclean) should first be drawn off by tapping, and the cure by medecines afterwards immediately attempted. To effect a removal of the accumulation of water, other remedies must be resorted to besides purgatives; to meet this indication we must call in the aid of diuretics, which from their acknowledged influence over the absorbents & emunctories, have always been considered of the utmost utility — This class of medecines has, however, been allowed by the most experienced practitioners, to be very various & uncertain in their effects; nor is it at all unreasonable thus to conclude, knowing

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under what opposite states of the system they have been prescribed — As among the purgatives, these medicines admit of a selection — and such of them should be used as are capable of exciting an increased flow of urine without producing a stimulating influence on the system generally, which would undoubtedly, if it were the case, prove prejudicial, as from the nature of the case, the object in view is to obviate & not excite this irritation — The Diuretics best calculated to fulfil this end are the saline preparations such as the Acetate, Citrate, Supertartrate and other similal combinations of Potash, & Soda. All of these possess the advantage of cooling the system, and of subduing irritation & inflammation or febrile action at the same time that their full diuretic effects are obtained, and on this account they are to be preferred to the more stimulating individuals belonging to this class. —

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"They are recommended to be given largely diluted with water, & frequent taking care to regulate the dose & quantity so that they may not pass off by the bowels — in this manner they very frequently, by exciting a copious flow of urine carry off all the anasarcous swellings —

"The digitalis, as possessing the peculiar power of reducing arterial action, and allaying irritation, whilst its diuretic properties are equally displayed, appears to be admirably adapted to this form of dropsy — and Dr. Blackall gives sufficient testimony in favour of its use in those cases which are accompanied with inflammation, or where the urine was coagulable by heat &c. and it has been supposed by some that it was to its power of controling the force of the circulation, it owed its diuretic quality, "the action of the vessels employed in the circulation of the blood and the energy of the absorbents being, to a certain extent, antagoni=

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zing powers". The infusion of the leaves of the plant, when carefully dried & fresh, is the preparation most recommended – one drachm to half pint of boiling water, is the manner of preparing it as first recommended by Withering, & adopted by Blackall & Maclean – it may be given also in powder or tincture, but the infusion is that form which is most generally advised – It is observed by authors that to obtain the full benefit of this medicine it should be given & continued until a decided impression is made upon the system – "By the use of this medicine, it is stated by authors, the dropsical swellings have been completely dispersed in a very few days – but when it has been used for a considerable time without effect it is recommended to combine it with Super. Tart. Potassa., or employ the Creamor Tartar or some other in its place – A union of the digitalis with opium in small doses has been highly extolled

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and, in a theoretical point, would seem admirably adapted to cases of an inflammatory nature — and it is related on the authority of Drs Mead, Heberden & Willis, that opiates of themselves have effected cures; which is not at all unreasonable, knowing the power, which this medicine has in controling morbid irritation, & in determining to the surface —

Other diuretics of a stimulating nature have been recommended in dropsies by all practical writers on the subject — but it may readily be perceived, from what I have already said that such medicines would be considered inadmissible as long as there exist evident marks of a sthenic diathesis; but when this is completely subdued and the water is slowly removed in consequence of a torpor of the secreting vessels of the kidneys, some of them may, with propriety, be resorted to; though not without considerable

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To have descended into the particulars of each class of Medicines capable of answering the second indication, would have been a task too irksome; therefore I have given only an outline of those which appear most suitable in the Ethenice, Ascites & Anasarca—
To change that state of the system favourable to farther effusion; and to restore strength to the body, after the water has been evacuated, are the third indications to which our attention is directed— by all authors, tonics are particularly recommended to accomplish these ends— as the stomach and digestive organs are generally impaired either, from the cause of the disease, the disease itself or the long continuation of the operation of Medicines, these correctives & corroborants are strongly demanded to impart tone & energy to these organs— of these the Peru-

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Tart. Potass., or some refrigerant diuretics — Dr. Blackall observes that "if the urine is devoid of albumen", which is an evidence of the reduction of the inflammation," especially after the use of ℞ of Glove, tonics generally confirm the strength, and put the patient out of any fear of a relapse — Accompanying these means, moderate daily exercise should be practiced; friction with warm flannel every morning; supporting the lower extremities with flannel rollers, and a tight jacket, or bandages of the same materials, applied around the body, are highly recommended both as giving support to the relaxed fibers & as determining to the surface & promoting a gentle diaphoresis — To rebuild the system & supply the loss which it has sustained, a light and nourishing diet should be taken; Meats, that are least stimulating & of easy digestion, are to be preferred: with these are advised to be taken

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the pungent aromatic or antiscorbutic vegetables — as garlic, horseradish, onions, cresses, the red-beet &c — The drinks ~~at~~ the first should be of a refrigerating, diuretic quality —

Thus, by avoiding all exciting causes, adhering to a strict regimen for a time, and keeping the body warmly clad; persons, who may have been the unfortunate subjects of this disease, will ensure themselves against any farther accession of it, and be restored to a perfect health, or at least a reasonable proportion of it.